

Ilan Pappé - The Ethnic Cleansing Of Palestine

Chapter 9

celebrates the convergence of Hanuka, Christmas and Id al-Fitr as ‘The Feast of all Feasts for Peace and Coexistence’ – people continued to be robbed and abused, mostly by Irgun and Stern Gang members, but the Hagana also took an active part in the assaults. Ben-Gurion condemned their behaviour, but did nothing to stop it: He was content with recording it in his diary.^{[30](#)}

Rape

We have three kinds of sources that report on **rape**, and thus know that severe cases of **rape** did take place. It remains more difficult to form an idea of how many women and young girls were victimised by Jewish troops in this way. Our first source is the international organisations such as the UN and the Red Cross. They never submitted a collective report, but we do have short and concise accounts of individual cases. Thus, for instance, very soon after Jaffa was taken, a Red Cross official, de Meuron, reported how Jewish soldiers had **raped** a girl and killed her brother. He remarked in general that as Palestinian men were taken away as prisoners, their women were left at the mercy of the Israelis. Yitzhak Chizik wrote to Kaplan in the letter mentioned above: ‘And about the **rapes**, Sir, you probably have already heard.’ In an earlier letter to Ben-Gurion, Chizik reported how ‘a group of soldiers [had] burst into a house, killed the father, injured the mother and **raped** the daughter.’

We know of course more about cases in places where outside observers were present, but this does not mean women were not **raped** elsewhere. Another Red Cross report tells of a horrific incident that began on 9 December 1948 when two Jewish soldiers burst into the house of al-Hajj Suleiman Daud, who had been expelled with his family to Shaqara. The soldiers hit his wife and kidnapped his eighteen-year-old daughter. Seventeen days later the father was able to get hold of an Israeli lieutenant, to whom he protested. The rapists appeared to belong to Brigade Seven. It is impossible to know what exactly happened in those seventeen days before the girl was set free; the worst may be presumed.^{[31](#)}

The second source is the Israeli archives, which only cover cases in which the rapists were brought to trial. David Ben-Gurion seems to have been informed about each case and entered them into his diary. Every few

days he has a sub-section: 'Rape Cases'. One of these records the incident Chizik had reported to him: 'a case in Acre where soldiers wanted to rape a girl. They killed the father and wounded the mother, and the officers covered for them. At least one soldier raped the girl.'³²

Jaffa seems to have been a hothouse for the cruelty and war crimes of the Israeli troops. One particular battalion, Battalion 3 – commanded by the same person who had been in charge when its soldiers committed massacres in Khisas and Sa'sa, and cleansed Safad and its environs – was so savage in its behaviour that its soldiers were suspected of being involved in most of the rape cases in the city, and the High Command decided it best to withdraw them from the town. However, other units were no less guilty of molesting women in the first three to four months of the occupation. The worst period was towards the end of the first truce (July 8) when even Ben-Gurion became so apprehensive about the pattern of behaviour that emerged among the soldiers in the occupied cities, especially the private looting and the rape cases, that he decided not to allow certain army units to enter Nazareth after his troops had taken the town during the 'ten-day' war.³³

Our third source is the oral history we have from both the victimisers and the victims. It is very difficult to get the facts in the former case and almost impossible, of course, in the latter. But their stories have already helped shed light on some of the most appalling and inhuman crimes in the war that Israel waged against the Palestinian people.

The perpetrators can only talk, it seems, shielded by the safe distance of years. This is how a particularly appalling case came to light just recently. On 12 August 1949, a platoon of soldiers in the Negev, based in Kibbutz Nirim not far from Beit Hanun, on the northern edge of today's Gaza Strip, captured a twelve-year-old Palestinian girl and locked her up for the night in their military base near the kibbutz. For the next few days she became the platoon's sex slave as the soldiers shaved her head, gang-raped her and in the end murdered her. Ben-Gurion lists this rape too in his diary but it was censored out by his editors. On 29 October 2003, the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* publicised the story based on the testimonies of the rapists: twenty-two soldiers had taken part in the barbaric torture and execution of the girl. When they were then brought to trial, the severest punishment the court handed down was a prison term of two years for the soldier who had done the actual killing.

Oral recollection also exposed cases of **rape** throughout the occupation of Palestine's villages: from the village of Tantura in May, through the village of Qula in June, and ending with one story after another of abuse and **rape** in the villages seized during Operation Hiram. Many of the cases were corroborated by UN officials who interviewed a number of women from the villages who were willing to come forward and talk about their experiences. When, many years later, some of these people were interviewed, it was obvious how difficult it still proved for the men and women from the village to talk about names and details in these cases, and the interviewers came away with the impression that they all knew more than they wished or were able to tell.

Eyewitnesses also reported the callous and humiliating way in which women were stripped of all their jewellery, to the very last item. The same women were then harassed physically by the soldiers, which in Tantura ended in **rape**. Here is how Najiah Ayyub described it: 'I saw that the troops who encircled us tried to touch the women but were rejected by them. When they saw that the women would not surrender, they stopped. When we were on the beach, they took two women and tried to undress them, claiming they had to search the bodies.'³⁴

Tradition, shame, and trauma are the cultural and psychological barriers that prevent us from gaining the fuller picture of the **rape** of Palestinian women within the general plunder Jewish troops wreaked with such ferocity in both rural and urban Palestine during 1948 and 1949. Perhaps in the fulness of time someone will be able to complete this chapter of the chronicle of Israel's ethnic cleansing of Palestine.

DIVIDING THE SPOILS

Once the winds of war had subsided and the newly established State of Israel had signed armistice agreements with its neighbours, the Israeli government relaxed its occupation regime somewhat and gradually put a halt to the looting and ghettoisation of the small groups of urban Palestinians left behind. In August 1948, a new structure was put in place to deal with the consequences of the ethnic cleansing, called 'The Committee for Arab Affairs'. As before, Bechor Shitrit's proved to be the more humane